

ROTARY State of the Town Address  
First Selectman Jim Marpe  
February 10, 2019

*As prepared for delivery*

I am very happy to be with you today to report on the state of our town, because Westport is strong and well-positioned to deal with the challenges of the future. And there are challenges, as I'll discuss later in my ever-popular "What Keeps Me Awake" summary, but I remain optimistic because we have worked to prepare ourselves for the future.

Thank you to our two Rotary Clubs, and in particular Eileen Flug and Jeff Weiser who led the organization of today's events.

And a big "Thank You" to the Rotary Clubs for the attractive new signs at our Town's major gateways – reflecting the quality, tradition and brand of our community.

A really big THANK YOU to all Westport Employees.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and thank our Town employees who play an enormous role in making Westport such a great place to live and work.

All of our employees deserve to be acknowledged and highlighting their individual efforts would be a program in and of itself, but one example of going above and beyond, Lt. Jillian Cabana, who also serves on the Board of the Fairfield County Domestic Violence Crisis Center – helps our public safety, schools and Human Services organizations focus on the impact of domestic violence in all its forms, on our families and our community.

## THE BRAND OF WESTPORT

We continue to build our reputation (our "Brand of Westport") as one of the most attractive communities in the region to live, work, shop, dine, raise a family and retire. We have our eyes on the future while we also continue to respect and preserve Westport's charm and small-town character.

Our Board of Education chairman Mark Mathias has just shared with you an update on the Westport public schools and all of the wonderful initiatives underway to maintain our status as a world-class school district. We know this is one of the key reasons newcomers move to Westport and why our property values stay high. I'll have more to say later regarding rehabilitating Coleytown Middle School, but first I want to focus on several other key factors that also contribute to our success. That is:

- Quality of Life and
- Economic Vitality
- All of which are supported by our fiscal responsibility

## QUALITY OF LIFE

During the past year:

- We listened to you and continue to improve the Compo Beach experience
  - Traffic flow

- Parking
- Accessibility for all (Ned Dimes Marina ramp; MobiMat; South Beach Restrooms)
- Completed the bunker improvement at Longshore Club Park
- Dredged the marina channel

## **SENIOR CENTER**

- Completed and opened the expansion of the Westport Center for Senior Activities
  - 50% more space for programming
  - Improved parking
  - On time and on budget
  - Envy of other communities

The success of the Senior Center project was due on no small measure to a cadre of volunteers who worked to make it happen. I would like to acknowledge the chair of that Committee, Lynn Goldberg, who was recognized last week by the Friends of the Center for Senior Activities as their “Person of the Year.” And I want to ask all the other committee members who are here to please stand. Thank you and thanks to all the many citizen volunteers in our community. Without so many smart, enthusiastic, imaginative and creative volunteers, including our Rotarians, Westport could not be the great place that it is.

## **RESILIENCY & SUSTAINABILITY**

A commitment to the environment and a sustainable and resilient world has long been a hallmark of Westport. Yesterday at Compo Beach we celebrated the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our nationally recognized ordinance requiring reusable shopping bags and banning single use plastic bags in an effort to persuade the State Legislature to pass a similar statewide statute. And the RTM continues this tradition of doing our share to protect the planet by forbidding fracking waste and limiting the use of plastic straws.

Renovation of the Town-operated Wakeman Town Farm and the opening of Tim’s Kitchen have resulted in an amazing expansion of programming and participation- focusing on sustainability and family fun.

Speaking of sustainability, and our commitment to becoming a NetZero community – Westport has been designated a Bronze Certified Sustainable Community by Sustainable CT – only 22 communities have received this designation which recognizes numerous and ongoing initiatives to improve our environment and resiliency.

Earthplace continues to set the bar for providing easy access to understanding our natural environment and how it can be protected

Related to resiliency, and sustainability we are rethinking the vision and mission of the Green Task Force to address a more comprehensive sustainability approach – and for the Task Force to take on an advisory role for distributed sustainability and resiliency efforts throughout the community. Just this past Thursday night, the group officially voted to rename themselves “Sustainable Westport.”

## **PUBLIC SAFETY**

Our dedicated police, firefighters and Emergency Medical professionals and volunteers continue to excel at keeping us safe and responding to emergencies in a well-trained and disciplined manner. We recognize

that changes in communication technology have begun to obsolete the old ways in communicating community alerts and warning messages that rely on reverse 911 and Code Red.

- The new Nixle emergency notification service allows government agencies to send emergency alert messages to local residents via phone, email and web. If you haven't already, make sure you register for Nixle by visiting the Town or Public Safety websites or texting 06880 to 888777.
- We are advancing the multi-community public safety dispatch center project with the Town of Fairfield and Sacred Heart University.
- Our public safety personnel are continuing to expand their focus on prevention through citizen training classes, impaired driving demonstrations, and initiatives such as the School Resource Officer.

## **PARKING & PAVING**

Improving parking throughout Westport

- Elm Street through a creative land exchange
- Parker Harding Compactors improving the visual look of the space and opening up traffic lanes
- Expanding Railroad Parking at Green's Farms and the Saugatuck area, paid for by Railroad Parking Fees
- Relaxed parking requirements for medical offices
- Paving of 10 miles of our 123 miles of Town-maintained roadways, including Harbor Road
- And our Public Works Department was awarded seven state and federal grants since last February for several bridge and roads and sidewalks projects

## **CULTURE**

- Library transformation re-opening this summer
- We are introducing Otocast walking tour app brought to you by the Arts Advisory Committee
- TEAM Westport completed 30 events related to equity and inclusion, including its annual essay contest
- Our Human Services Department now has the ability to accept online donations to support our neediest neighbors
- Maker Faire – now the largest event of its kind in New England and securing Westport's reputation as a center of innovation
- The Westport Historical Society is re-thinking its mission and activities. As an example of that was First Light, a substance-free family event that substituted for our traditional First Night

## **PARKS ENHANCEMENTS**

- Focus on Riverside Park and Wadsworth Arboretum

- Long term planning for Longshore Club Park including tennis, platform tennis, Inn at Longshore and a clubhouse
- Town-wide replacement plan of all artificial turf playing fields that will be fabricated in line with the RTM's recently approved artificial in-fill ordinance.

## **TRAFFIC**

We are working with the DOT to begin a number of improvements related to roads and bridges, including:

- The Main to Train Study to improve traffic flow, pedestrian safety and multi-modal transportation on Post Road and Riverside Avenue from East Main Street to the Saugatuck RR Station.
- Start to begin addressing intersections of Post Road and Bulkley Avenue, Roseville Road and the Fresh Market area
- Post Road Paving – from the Norwalk border to Compo Road
- Cribari Bridge Project Advisory Committee is meeting regularly with the State DOT representatives to work toward a bridge rehabilitation solution that reflects the character of the Saugatuck neighborhood, limits further through traffic, particularly 18-wheel trucks, and improves traffic flow in that area.
- Applying to the State to have Green's Farms Road and Rte. 136 declared a "No thru trucks" route
- Building on the Saugatuck Transit Oriented Development Study, we will be embarking on several streetscape improvement projects in the Saugatuck area including Riverside Avenue, Franklin Street and Railroad Place
- Continue our program of sidewalk rehabilitation as well as a new sidewalk on North Maple Avenue to improve pedestrian safety in the Long Lots neighborhood

## **ECONOMIC VITALITY – BUSINESS**

A key to making Westport one of the best places to live and work is sustaining and increasing our economic vitality. My administration is committed to this, and has been walking the walk on the issue:

- "How to Open a Restaurant in Westport" brochure completed with the help of one of our interns
- In spite of concerns with empty storefronts, I was excited to be a part of the opening of 30 businesses. New national retail businesses such as Peloton and Sundance are opening on Main Street.

Westport has a thriving local business community, many of which are owned and operated by Westport residents. Second Selectwoman Jen Tooker has been leading our administration's outreach efforts to Westport's small business community, having met with over 30 local business owners. Not only are local businesses the backbone of our economy, they are also supportive of our local community. A great example is the Westport Moms, run by Megan Rutstein and Melissa Post. Through their Local Love initiative in December, co-sponsored by the DMA, the Chamber of Commerce and the Town, they raised over \$10,000 for the future building of a Downtown playground. Many contributed to that donation, but the WestportMoms made it happen. We are very grateful.

## **ECONOMIC VITALITY – SERVICES**

- Land-use permitting software – the Accela implementation project is underway
- Collaboration with the Library, which is an amazing business resource
- Downtown Plan Implementation Committee supporting the economic vitality initiatives for the Main Street area.
- Westport is part of the Fairfield 5 – five municipalities (Greenwich, Stamford, Norwalk, Fairfield and ourselves) that represent 15 to 20% of the State's jobs and employees, and 20% of Connecticut's income tax revenues. We are teaming to build on those positives to market the benefits of our towns and Fairfield County as a whole, and to lobby the State for transportation improvement and economic development resources.

## **ECONOMIC VITALITY – ACCOLADES**

- The Yankee Institute has named Westport as one of Connecticut's Top 3 business-friendly towns.
- WalletHub has named us one of the Top 20 small municipalities out of 1200 in the U.S. and as a Top 20 location to start a small business.

## **FISCAL STABILITY**

On March 6, I'll present my annual operating budget to the Town, so I'll focus more on this topic then, but I want to note a few important developments:

- Just this week we announced that the net 2018 Grand List of \$11.3 billion represents a total increase of approximately 1.07 percent from 2017. Overall, this year's increase was smaller than in the past two years but still indicate that Westport remains a community of great interest to businesses, developers, and new residents.
- And when you look at construction, there is also an 8% increase in land use permits in FY 2018 over FY 2017
- The Town of Westport is a triple A community as rated by Moody's. We worked to understand the basis for that designation and completed a risk analysis that validated our approach to debt & reserve policies and levels as well as capital project investment.
- We've completed pension negotiations with several of our larger unions, which will result in long term town pension and OPEB contribution savings greater than \$80M over the next 20 years.

## **WHAT KEEPS ME UP AT NIGHT**

- Dealing with the fiscal and community challenges introduced by the temporary and potential long term closing of Coleytown Middle School.

The water incursion and indoor air quality problems related to Coleytown Middle School are well known and have been a focus for a large segment of our community for 6 months. They have impacted or threatened to impact our world-class educational model, potentially our home values and community durability, the lives of many of our education employees, but most importantly, the lives of many students and their families. The absence of some degree of certainty about the future has been very frustrating but I believe that with the votes of the funding bodies this past week, we now have a defined near term path to our middle school education. The Public Site and Building Committee has taken responsibility for working on behalf of the Town and the Board of Education to ensure that the modular structures that have

been approved will be installed safely on budget and to the best of everyone's ability by August of this year.

The CMS Task Force, which included several members of the Selectman's Maintenance Study Committee, developed a clearer path to rehabilitating and re-occupying CMS. Our Public Works and Building Officials have begun the planning actions needed to safely and confidently re-occupy CMS as quickly as possible, hopefully in 2020, depending on our approach to State construction funding.

While my daughter graduated from CMS 20 years ago, Selectwoman Jen Tooker's youngest daughter is in 5th grade, so she is personally in the middle of this situation. We are both acutely aware of the anxiety and frustration in our community surrounding this issue. As such, I have asked Jen to take the role of proactively finding ways to bring a sense of community back to our school-age families.

The Board of Education and Town are partners in this effort. Together, we will work to restore whatever parts of our brand that may have tarnished by this experience and emerge with an even stronger educational delivery environment. And we'll re-structure and centralize the Town's management of its long term building maintenance to assure that problems like this do not happen again.

- The impact of large multi-family housing developments on Westport's infrastructure and resources as well as its character.

We are seeing increasing diversification of our housing offerings. Some of this is caused by the affordable housing regulations imposed by the State (e.g. 8-30g), although I am pleased to tell you that with the opening of the apartment complex at 1177 PRE, we have been able to file for a 4- year moratorium and expect to receive it in a matter of months. But there are a number of grandfathered projects that will likely proceed. The challenge to our community is not just to the character of neighborhoods, but also to firefighting and police response, potentially to educational capacity, to human services support and to our tradition as a single family home community. I want to assure you that our land use and public safety departments are doing everything they can to insure the appropriate quality of these developments.

- The third wake-up call comes from the ongoing fiscal challenges in the face of Federal tax law changes, unpredictable State funding and increasing demands on town resources.

Our funding and support from the State continues to be problematic, now and into the future. We expect to see little, if any, state funding or programs coming to Westport, certainly nowhere in proportion to funding we provide the State. And I caution our legislators to work with their colleagues to undo or at least not introduce well-meaning legislation that introduces additional mandates to municipalities that are unfunded. And with April 15, 2019 approaching, we will soon understand the impact of the Federal government's tax reform on current and prospective residents as the impact of limited deductibility of State and local property taxes potential impacts our desirability as a community.

There are other on-going concerns such as cybersecurity for our Town's computer information systems, an aging transportation infrastructure system that continues to turn a 1 hour train trip to New York City into at least an hour and 20 minutes. And the rising cost of recycling, once a revenue center, threatens our longstanding commitment to encouraging this environmentally friendly activity.

## **CONCLUSION**

Having said all that, within the tristate region, Westport remains an attractive and desirable location relative to many nearby communities and we must invest in keeping our Town on that position.

Westport is and will continue to be among the most attractive towns in the tristate area to raise a family, educate children, create and grow a business, and retire. We are a truly rare and wonderful combination of a small, charming New England town committed to celebrating our past and preserving our history, and also a cutting edge community that fosters innovation, creativity and progress. I am confident about where we are as a Town and where we are going in the future because I know that all of us – our schools, families, elected and appointed officials, town employees, businesses, and every volunteer who contributes to the success of our town -- is fully engaged and committed to making Westport the best it can be.